



NEUTRALITY AND GENERALISATION IN NON-AGENTIVE RECEPTIVE VOICE: A CRITICAL LINGUISTIC STUDY OF EL-RUFAI'S *THE ACCIDENTAL PUBLIC SERVANT*

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Abstract

*This paper presents and analyses the use of non-agentive receptive voice as a system of linguistic choice in El-Rufai's *The Accidental Public Servant* and the linguistic components in such constructions. The objective is to find out how the use of such construction stands to be a choice from the set of options and how this choice creates some contextual implications.*

The data for the analysis are streamlined first using corpus software (The corpus software used is AntCon 3.5.8. text analysis software) and then, purposive sampling is used to select some fourteen (14) strands of clauses for the analysis. From the findings two different types of pragmatic/contextual implications are found, namely, neutrality and generalisation. These implications are, in essence, the effects that come up in non-agentive voice construction. These are what Simpson (1993) calls 'pragmatic and contextual implications'.

Keywords: *Neutrality, Generalisation, Receptive Voice*

Introduction

Linguistic choice is one of central claims of the Systemic Functional Grammar (SFG). According to Halliday (2013, cited in Fontaine, Bartlett and O'Grady, 2013), semiotic activity involves semiotic choice: meaning this rather than meaning that. The use of non-agentive construction is one of the options that a speaker of language may choose to select from the set of possible linguistic choices. According to the theory, language should be seen from two perspectives, namely, the linguistic perspective and the social perspective. Thus, language is a network of systems of making meaning, and each system, in the network, represents a choice (Halliday, 1994). This choice may not be entirely conscious, but a speaker/writer is provided with the resources of choosing from 'a set of possible alternatives'. This suggests that choice between sets of linguistic alternatives is not only exercised at the level of words, rather at all the levels of language the speaker is provided with sets of alternatives from which to select. One may choose to use a particular lexical item from other alternatives, or a particular group of words, clause or even voice pattern over other possible options.

In SFG, the notion of transitivity is given an entirely different view. Instead of the quality of having an object or not, transitivity is defined as set of processes realised through verbs. Thus, the system of transitivity has six process types. Halliday and Matthiessen (2004) list them as: Mental, Material, Relational, Behavioural, Existential and Verbal. These processes represent the flow of events that form our experience of the world. Within the system of transitivity, there is a sub-system in which there is no separate agent; or it is represented as engendered from outside, in which case there is another participant functioning as Agent (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2014). This sub-system is called 'Ergative' system. Ergative construction stands at a par with the transitive construction discussed above. For example:

1. The police exploded the bomb – Transitive construction
2. The bomb exploded - Ergative construction

In Ergative construction, the configuration of a process type is altered. That is, the normal pattern of configuration is changed. Ergative

construction largely occurs within the material process, whereby a 'goal' (a supposed receiver/object) occupies a position typical of an 'actor', or a 'beneficiary' occupies a position typical of an 'agent'. Within the system of ergative voice construction, there are other patterns of representation, namely, affective and receptive. In receptive, the passive verbal group is used. Also, there are two other ways of presenting of receptive voice construction, namely, agentive and non-agentive. In agentive construction, the agent is presented in the clause, while in non-agentive, the object is not presented in the clause. For example:

3. The bomb was exploded by the police- Agentive construction
4. The bomb was exploded- Non-agentive construction

According to Halliday and Matthiessen (2014), what is central to the notion of ergativity is the feature of agency and voice. Agency is usually introduced by the preposition (by-), while voice features in the verb phrase. Thus, a clause with no feature of agency is neither active nor passive but 'middle'. One with agency is non-middle, or effective, in agency. An effective clause is then either operative or receptive in voice. In an operative clause, the subject is the agent and the process is realised by an active verbal group; in a receptive clause, the subject is the medium and the process is realised by a passive verbal group. (Halliday and Matthiessen, 2004:297). This paper analyses the use of non-agentive receptive voice as a system of linguistic choice in El-Rufai's *The Accidental Public Servant* and the linguistic components in such constructions. The objective is to find out how the use of such construction stands to be a choice from the set of options and how this choice creates contextual implications.

About the Book

The book, *The Accidental Public Servant*, (2013) is an autobiography of Malam Nasir El-Rufai, a one-time Director General of the Nigeria's Bureau for Public Enterprises (BPE), a former minister of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, and the immediate past executive governor of Kaduna State. It narrates his life from early childhood and mainly his public service career. Like many other notable personalities, El-Rufai saw the need to

write about himself and his stay in government. The publication of the book has elicited heated debates and rebuttal from the public and the actors involved (www.infomationng.com). The book is set in post-independence Nigeria especially as it relates to public service in Nigeria. The book contains graphic details on how government and politics are done in Nigeria and how the issue of corruption remains a constant factor in both government and private sector. Another important issue highlighted in the book is how 'connection' rather than merit proves to be the best way to get things done in Nigeria. The publishing details of the book are as follows:

Title: *The Accidental Public Servant*

Author: Nasir Ahmad | El-Rufai

Publishers: Safari Books Ltd

Pages: 627 (including 95-page appendices)

The book is divided into seventeen chapters with different headings, the first three chapters discuss the early life of the author, while the remaining chapters discuss his stay in government and other political life.

Autobiography revolves around the participating narrator and this is understandably the reason why the author chooses to write about himself, since as Gusdorf (1980) states 'the motive largely is to put some events into the way they need them, since no one can better do justice to himself than an interested party'. Also, it provides a ground for the author to tell his own stories as former government official.

The Framework

The theoretical framework for this paper is Paul Simpson's (1993) framework for stylistic analysis as found in the book titled *Language, Ideology and Point of View*. The work is a critical approach to textual analysis, because it integrates critical linguistic practices into the domain of stylistics. In this sense, language is seen as a 'representation, as a projection of positions and perspectives, as a way of communicating attitudes and assumptions' (Simpson, 1993: p.2).

According to Simpson (1993), Stylistics refers to the practice of using linguistics for the study of literature and what sets stylistic practice apart from the other traditional literary-critical approaches is the view that there is no such thing as 'literary language' exclusive to established

literary canon. Also, unlike other critical practices, stylistics emphasises on the language of the text. Thus, a text is a linguistic construct and it is processed it as linguistic construct before anything else. Critical Linguistics, like stylistics, approaches interpretation of texts on the basis of linguistic analysis. According to Simpson (1993), this tradition of linguistic enquiry started at the University of East Anglia in the 1970s from the work of Roger Fowler and his associates. The importance of this practice is that it expands the horizons of stylistics by focusing on texts other than those regarded as literary, and despite the heterogeneity of texts, the motivating principle is to explore the value systems and sets of beliefs which reside in texts. In other words, it explores ideology in language. Ideology, in critical linguistics, refers to the ways in which what we say or think interacts with society. The central claim of critical linguistics is that language reproduces ideology, since language is not used in a context-less vacuum but it is used in a host of discourse contexts. Fairclough (1989 cited in Simpson, 1993) argues that ideology is embedded in the language and that by foregrounding the linguistic code employed in such contexts, analysts can 'demystify' and 'denaturalise' what normally passes us by as real-time participants in everyday interaction. According to Simpson (1993:4), there is a kind of a two-way benefit in analysing text using linguistic models:

The rigour which the use of linguistics brings to textual analysis has another pay-off. Literary texts offer an exciting testing ground for linguistic theories and constructs, often forming a path to clearer formalisations of linguistic knowledge. There is a kind of bivalent heuristic here: linguistic models offer a 'way in' to a text, while the text itself allows for a challenging application for those models.

Simpson (1993), thus, identifies some linguistic concepts as models through which textual analysis and interpretation are carried out, namely, point of view, modality and transitivity. The areas of stylistics and transitivity are mutually compatible and complementary. Transitivity provides to stylistics a resource for the analysis. Stylistics, in turn serves transitivity

as a ground for the application. Fowler (1991) states that 'a central insight of Halliday made very explicit in his most recent book is that transitivity is the foundation of representation: it is the way the clause is used to analyse events and situations as being of certain types.' Even in the area of stylistics, the area of critical stylistics is one of the popular areas of the application of transitivity in the stylistic analysis. Fowler (1977) states that Halliday's 'functional' approach encourages us to think about *why* a language-user chooses one sentence-structure rather than alternative. This choice, according to Fowler (1991) indicates, in a way, a particular point of view and angle of seeing. He states that 'since transitivity makes options available, we are always suppressing some possibilities, so the choice we make- better, the choice made by the discourse- indicates our point of view, is ideologically significant.' In similar vein, Simpson (1993) states that the system of options available for ergativity and voice has important pragmatic and contextual implications. Thus, the choice of agentive or non-agentive clause is an important part of message construction.

Methodology

The design of this research is a mixed method approach. The data for the analysis are streamlined first using corpus software (The corpus software used is AntCon 3.5.8. text analysis software. AntCon 3.5.8., is a corpus linguistic software developed in 2007, as a free text analysis software used by many researchers prominently for the purpose of concordance, concordance plot, collocation, keyword and word list checks) and then, purposive sampling is used to select some fourteen (14) strands of clauses for

the analysis. The basic unit of data in this research is a clause constructed in a non-agentive voice. The conception of clause is as defined in Halliday's Systemic Functional Grammar. In the theory, clause is described as a basic unit of language and communication as stated by Bloor and Bloor (2004): "it is at the level of clause that we can begin to talk about how things exist, how things happen and how people feel in the world around us." This means that structures that are larger than a clause contain more than one strand of information and therefore, should be treated as independent units. This follows what Halliday and Matthiessen (2014:8) state: "when a number of clauses are linked together grammatically, we talk of a clause complex (each single linkage within a clause complex can be referred to as one clause nexus)." In this research, a clause is therefore considered as a unit of data and the unit of analysis. The data analysis involves the presentation of the clauses in both ergative (non-agentive) and transitive (standard) forms. This, according to Simpson (1993), is 'to show how both types of analysis interrelate with one another'. Also, all the other aspects of analytical procedure, in this paper, are within the stylistic framework as discussed by Simpson (1993) in *Language, Ideology and Point of View*.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Here, the data are presented and analysed as follows:

Each strand of a clause is presented as a unit of data. Then, in line with Simpson (1993) model of clause analysis, both the ergative and the transitivity (standard) models are used to analyse the components of the clause.

Clause One

The revised plan was presented to the NCP early in December 1999. (TAPS, p75)

Table 1a

Ergative Model

Medium	Process	Client	Circumstance
The revised plan	Was presented	To the NCP	Early in December 1999

Table 1b
Standard Model

Actor	Process	Goal	Client	Circumstance
X	Presented	The revised plan	To the NCP	Early in December 1999

Here, the sense of neutrality is formed by the narrator in the sense that his personality is clearly removed from the narration. It is clear in the text that the person of the narrator is involved (as first person singular/plural pronoun), but the agent was removed.

Clause Two

As a result, our country is being robbed of its potential in a significant way. (TAPS, p483)

Table 2a
Ergative Model

Circumstance	Medium	Process	circumstance	Circumstance
As a result,	Our country	Is being robbed	Of its potential	In a significant way

In the clause above, the case of movement is found in that the initial position is occupied by the circumstantial element

Table 2b
Standard Model

Circumstance	Actor	Process	Goal	Matter	Circumstance
As a result,	X	Is robbing	Our country	Of its potential	In a significant way

In the Clause above, the use of such construction creates a generalised sense in the narration. The narrator avoids using an active or agentive construction in order to construct a generic statement.

Clause Three

We are badly governed. (TAPS, p482)

Table 3a
Ergative Model

Medium	Process	Circumstance	Process
We	Are	Badly	Governed

Table 3b
Standard Model

Actor	Process	Goal	Circumstance
X	Govern(s)	Us	Badly

The narrator, here, generalised his message by avoiding explicit mentioning of the actor in active or receptive agentive sense. Thus, generalisation is created using such construction.

Clause Four

Many Nigerians, particularly the political and military elite had been allocated plots of land, which remained undeveloped for years. (TAPS, p248)

Table 4a

Ergative Model

Medium	Process	Goal
Many Nigerians, particularly the political and military elite	Had been allocated	plots of land, which remained undeveloped for years

Table 4b

Standard Model

Actor	Process	Goal	Beneficiary
X	Allocated	plots of land, which remained undeveloped for years	Many Nigerians, particularly the political and military elite

Here, the narrator generalised the information in the Clause through the use of non-agentive clause. In this sense, the actor cannot be easily imagined.

Clause Five

Until the inauguration of the task force, only about 8000 plots had been allocated in my entire time as Minister. (TAPS, p258)

Table 5a

Ergative Model

Circumstance	Medium	Process	Circumstance
Until the inauguration of the task force	Only about 8000 plots	Had been allocated	In my entire time as minister

Table 5b

Standard Model

Circumstance	Actor	Process	Goal	Circumstance
Until the inauguration of the task force	X	Had allocated	Only about 8000 plots	In my entire time as minister

Here, also, the narrator avoids mentioning the actor which is, much likely, his personality in order to establish some sense of neutrality in the narration.

Clause Six

Contracts had been awarded to pipe the water 75 kilometers from Gurara River in Kaduna State to Abuja since Abuja has no natural water source. (TAPS, p226)

Table 6a
Ergative Model

Medium	Process	Circumstance
Contracts	Had been awarded	to pipe the water 75 kilometers from Gurara River in Kaduna State to Abuja since Abuja has no natural water source

Table 6b
Standard Model

Actor	Process	Goal	Circumstance
X	Had awarded	Contracts	to pipe the water 75 kilometers from Gurara River in Kaduna State to Abuja since Abuja has no natural water source

Here also, the narrator removed his personality from the clause in order to establish a sense of neutrality. He, thus, avoids mentioning the actor in this sense.

Clause Seven

The allocations were accordingly revoked. (TAPS, p290)

Table 7a
Ergative Model

Medium	Process	Circumstance	Process
The allocations	Were	Accordingly	Revoked

Table 7b
Standard Model

Actor	Circumstance	Process	Goal
X	Accordingly	Revoked	The allocations

Here, further, the narrator creates a sense of neutrality through the removal of the agent. In this way, he avoids mentioning of his personality in isolation or in pronoun plural.

Clause Eight

The careful and limited access to land data we had put in place was liberalised in 2008. (TAPS, p262)

Table 8a
Ergative Model

Medium	Process	Circumstance
The careful and limited access to land data we had put in place	Was liberalised	In 2008

Table 8b
Standard Model

Actor	Process	Goal	Circumstance
X	Liberalised	The careful and limited access to land data we had put in place	In 2008

The Clause above contains a sense of generalisation in the sense that the narrator removed the actor to make a generalised sense of action.

Clause Nine

The audit trail capabilities built into the system that enabled tracking of those that altered land records have been removed. (TAPS, p262)

Table 9a
Ergative Model

Medium	Process
The audit trail capabilities built into the system that enabled tracking of those that altered land records	Have been removed

Table 9b
Standard Model

Actor	Process	Goal
X	Removed	The audit trail capabilities built into the system that enabled tracking of those that altered land records

Here also, a generalised sense of action is established again through the removal of the actor.

Clause Ten

All manner of well-connected people were imported to enjoy the newly created gravy train in AGIS. (TAPS, p262)

Table 10a
Ergative Model

Medium	Process	Circumstance
All manner of well connected people -	Were imported	To enjoy the newly created gravy train in AGIS

Table 10b
Standard Model

Actor	Process	Beneficiary	Circumstance
X	Imported	All manner of well connected people -	To enjoy the newly created gravy train in AGIS

Clause Eleven

The national carrier, Nigeria Airways L td, had already been so identified for the 1999-2000 year. (TAPS, p75)

Table 11a

Ergative Model

Medium	Process	Circumstance	Process	Circumstance	Process	Circumstance
The national carrier, Nigeria Airways Ltd.	Had	Already	Been	So	Identified	For the 1999-2000 year

Table 11b

Standard Model

Actor	Process	Circumstance	Circumstance	Process	Target	Circumstance
X	Had	Already	So	Identified	The national carrier, Nigeria Airways Ltd.	For the 1999-2000 year

Here, the narrator avoids mentioning his personality as individual or in a group, but the reader is left to infer from the context.

Clause Twelve

All these were accomplished within 12 months of my reporting to duty in the FCT. (TAPS, p222)

Table 12a

Ergative Model

Medium	Process	Circumstance
All these	were accomplished	Within 12 months of my reporting to duty in the FCT

Table 12b

Standard Model

Actor	Process	Goal	Circumstance
X	Accomplished	All these	Within 12 Months of my reporting to duty in the FCT

In the Clause above, the narrator avoids mentioning of his person to create a sense of neutrality even though it can be easily inferred from the context that his person was involved.

Clause Thirteen

When they were ultimately fired about a year later. (TAPS, p203)

Table 13a
Ergative Model

Circumstance	Medium	Process	Circumstance	Process	Circumstance
When	They	Were	Ultimately	Fired	About a year later

Table 13b
Standard Model

Circumstance	Actor	Circumstance	Process	Goal	Circumstance
When	X	Ultimately	Fired	Them	About a year later

Here, the narrator removes his personality from the narration. The supposed actor is not

mentioned and the narrator is removed from the action as an individual or in a collective pronoun.

Clause Fourteen

But he too was rebuffed. (TAPS, p107)

Table 14a
Ergative Model

Linker	Medium	Circumstance	Process
But	He	Too	Was rebuffed

Table 14b
Standard Model

Linker	Sayer	Process	Target	Circumstance
But	X	Rebuffed	Him	Too

Here also, the narrator uses a non-agentive pattern to construct a neutral message. In this sense, the narrator removes his personality in the construct and the reader is left to either think of no any sayer or think of another sayer.

contextual implications'. Here, two different types of implications are identified from the data, namely, neutrality and generalisation.

Neutrality is a pragmatic implication found in non-agentive construction. Simpson (1993) states that one of the reasons in the use of non-agentive construction is the creation of a contextually 'neutral' explanation. In critical discourse analysis, the concept of 'objectivity' is used in place of neutrality, to refer to the fact that the processes are not affected by the analyst's prejudices and identity (Baker and Ellece, 2011). In this sense, neutrality is established in the narrative by the narrator's use of non-agentive construction in order to remove his personality from the narrative. Eight (8) clauses are used in this sense. These are:

Discussion

From the above, it is found that the use of non-agentive construction is a linguistic choice which can be made from the set of possible alternatives. This confirms the view of Fowler (1977) who states that Halliday's 'functional' approach encourages us to think about *why* a language-user chooses one sentence-structure rather than alternative. In this paper, two different types of pragmatic/contextual implications are found from the use of non-agentive construction. These implications are, in essence, the effects that come up in non-agentive voice construction. These are what Simpson (1993) calls 'pragmatic and

Clause 1: The revised plan was presented to the NCP early in December 1999.

Clause 5: Until the inauguration of the task force,

only about 8000 plots of land had been allocated in my entire time as minister.

Clause 6: Contract had been awarded to pipe the water 75 kilometres from Gurara River in Kaduna state to Abuja since Abuja has no natural water source.

Clause 7: The allocations were accordingly revoked

Clause 11: The national carrier, Nigeria Airways Ltd, had already been so identified.

Clause 12: All these were accomplished within 12 months of my reporting to duty in the FCT.

Clause 13: When they were ultimately fired about a year later.

Clause 14: But he too was rebuffed.

As can be seen in these clauses, the narrator uses the non-agentive constructions in the clauses that his personality can be involved. In all the clauses, a standard model would take a subject that is either the name of the narrator or a pronoun in singular or plural form and the personality of the narrator would be involved. The case of neutrality is not always a positive case, like 'objectivity', it is sometimes used as a means of avoidance of blame and responsibility on the part of the speaker/writer. For example, Clause 7, 'the allocations were accordingly revoked' can be alternatively put as 'We/I revoked the allocations', but the narrator chooses to eliminate the agency to create a neutral explanation. Thus, he uses a non-agentive construction. Also, in Clause 13, the narrator attempts to put across a neutral message by using non-agentive construction to possibly exonerate his person from what may not be politically good circumstance (dismissal of workers). This is even so, since all the preceding clauses in the clause complex are in active and effective voice with the name of the narrator as the agent, only for a sudden change of voice and removal of agent in that particular clause.

Generalisation is sometimes used as 'genericisation' in critical discourse study. This is the use of generic terms (such as quantifiers and pronouns) to make a broader claim or assertion. According to Van Dijk (2006), it is a situation whereby a speaker resorts to making generalisations instead of providing a concrete argument to support one's argument. This strategy is extended to the non-agentive voice construction in the sense that a statement that is

formed without mentioning of a specific agent is assumed to be generic. For example: Clause 2 (As a result, our country is being robbed of its potential in a significant way),

Clause 3 (we are badly governed),

Clause 4 (many Nigerians, particularly the political and military elite had been allocated plots of land which remained undeveloped for years.

Clause 8 (The careful and limited access to land data we had put in place was liberalised in (2008),

Clause 9 (The audit trail capabilities built into the system that enabled tracking of those that altered land records have been removed.) and

Clause 10 (All manner of well-connected people were imported to enjoy the gravy train in AGIS).

In these clauses, the use of alternative models can create more informative pieces. However, the use of standard models would be socially or legally more implicating also. For example, compare Clause 3 (We are badly governed) with 'X badly govern(s) us.'

While it is clear that the narrator has some persons as the supposed agents/actors in his mind especially in Clauses 8, 9 and 10, he, however, chooses to put his message across without mentioning the persons. By doing this, he has taken any social or legal burden off his shoulders. This further proves the assertion by Simpson (1993) that non-agentive may appear to be less-informative and strategically more 'neutral', but legally less-incriminating.

These are the implications that are created in the text through the use of non-agentive construction alternatives. These implications generally affect the pragmatics of the narrative in the sense that the choice from the set of options available to language user signifies an implicit statement of ideology and preference to one option over the other option. This also confirms the view of Fowler (1986 cited in Simpson, 1993) that "linguistic codes do not represent reality neutrally; they interpret, organise and classify the subjects of discourse."

Another important point is that the text analysed is an autobiographical text narrated from first person point of view. Thus, it can be seen as an attempt to put events into favourable

perspective by the narrator rather than a claim of tell-it-all account as Gusdorf (1980) asserts that the motive of writing an autobiography is for the writer to 'put some events into the way they need them.' Therefore, the text is primarily written with this motive as it is always about the author from his own angle.

Findings

From the above, the paper is able to make the following findings;

- The use of non-agentive construction is a linguistic choice which can be chosen from the set of other possible options. This supports the claim by Halliday (and Matthiessen) (1994, 2004, 2014) that language is a network of systems of making meaning and each system represents a choice.
- Two different types of pragmatic/contextual implications are found from the use of non-agentive construction. These implications are, neutrality and generalisation. In neutrality, the narrator puts across a supposedly neutral message which would not attract blame or legal consequences, but yet less-informative in the sense that the agent behind the action is taken out of the narrative. Thus, creating a vacuum of information in the structure. Generalisation is also an implication in the use of non-agentive receptive voice. In generalisation, the message is put across as a generalised narrative through the use of generic pronouns, quantifiers and in some instances, non-agentive receptive voice. This creates a strategically 'safe' narrative, although less-informative. The reader is left to factor out the supposed agents either contextually or through the gestalt knowledge of the world beyond the text.

These implications are strategic and not aliens to the genre of autobiography in the sense that it is a story about life narrated by oneself. The choice, according to Fowler (1991), indicates a particular point of view. Thus, the narrator puts the message across from his own perspective or as stated by Gusdorf (1980) that the motive of autobiographical writers is to 'put some

events in the way they need them'. This is evident from the clauses analysed as it can be seen that the clauses are presented to suits the narrator's view.

Conclusion

This paper presents and analyses how the use of non-agentive receptive voice construction creates some pragmatic implications, namely, 'neutrality' and 'generalisation' the paper extracts and analyses fourteen clause strands from the text. In doing the analysis, the clauses are presented in both transitive form and ergative form. The findings show that the use of non-agentive construction is a system of linguistic option which the user of language can select from the set of possible alternatives. In the analysis of this system of choice, it is found that two types of pragmatic implications are formed, namely, 'neutrality' and 'generalisation'. These implications indicate that the narrator, as a writer of autobiography, chooses to present that the world from his angle of viewing and in doing that he puts across a linguistically-strategic narrative that best suits his person. This, in turn, affect the narrative of the text, rendering it to be, in some ways, a suppressed narrative and less-informative piece.

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